

July 14, 2004

**Louisiana Coastal Area – Addressing Decades of Coastal Erosion
Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee
Testimony by Congressman David Vitter**

Chairman Duncan and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for having this hearing today. It is another important step in our fight to save Louisiana's coast.

Also, I want to specifically thank my colleagues from Louisiana—particularly Congressman Billy Tauzin. Billy, as our delegation's dean, has been a leader in Congress on so many issues, including the efforts to save Louisiana's coast. We'll miss him in Congress, and I thank him for his tireless service on behalf of Louisiana and the nation.

Saving our coast has been a top priority from some time for us in Louisiana. The coastal erosion crisis in Louisiana must be significantly addressed now. If we do not act sooner rather than later, Louisiana's coastal area might be lost forever.

As you know, Louisiana's coastal area is one of the most productive wetland areas in the nation. Within the coastal area, there are billions of dollars of critical infrastructure, and it contributes billions annually in economic impact.

The Louisiana coast is crucial to our nation's energy industry, producing \$30 billion annually in petroleum products, accounting for 27% of our domestic oil and 26% of our domestic natural gas. Also, the area is home to infrastructure and resources necessary to support this critical industry.

Louisiana's port system ranks first in the nation in tonnage, making the area critical to our national commerce. Louisiana's coastal wetlands also contribute billions of dollars in commercial and recreational fishing. Also, this area serves as habitat for a variety of waterfowl, fish, shellfish, and a number of endangered species.

Of course, Louisiana's coastal wetlands serve as a crucial barrier from hurricanes and storm surge. We in Louisiana are literally one storm away from disaster, and with each passing year, the loss of our coastal wetlands puts us more at risk of massive losses. This point, perhaps more than any of the others, highlights the immediate need for action.

With the regional, state, and national importance of the Louisiana coast, it is only right that the federal government take more of a role in efforts to stop further land loss and restore areas lost already.

This year has been a significant year for progress—for laying the building blocks—of a federal commitment to fight Louisiana's coastal erosion crisis.

First, in the Administration's budget submission to Congress, there was a statement that admitted that federal policies and actions are partly to blame for the crisis of coastal erosion. That was the first time a presidential budget submission included such a statement.

Next, in the House Budget Resolution, I was able to insert a statement underlying the importance of addressing Louisiana's coastal restoration and allowing for increased federal participation in the efforts.

And, earlier this month, the Administration released its draft for a near-term plan. This near-term plan is a first step, but a very important one in the fight against coastal erosion. It's a breakthrough in terms of federal commitment.

During the formulation of this near-term plan, I met with the President and a number of Administration officials, focusing on five key objectives for guiding the work that will address

critical needs and lay the groundwork for future restoration efforts. And, in my conversations with Jim Connaughton, the Chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality and the President's chief environmental advisor, I was assured that all five of these objectives were met in this near-term approach.

Here are the five key goals that I believe are achieved by the near-term proposal:

1. Releasing the substance of the full Louisiana Coastal Area Study.

All of the science and other findings of the original draft of the LCA study are included in the near-term plan. This near-term plan overlays that information with a focus on near-term objectives, but all the substance is there. Having this information publicly available is very important so that we all understand the further effort which will be needed.

2. Making sure the Near-Term Plan is significant in term of dollars.

This plan represents the most significant plan to date from the federal government to commit the needed resources to Louisiana's coast. This plan would provide \$1.9 billion total over ten years. Of that total, \$1.2 billion has been allocated for five critical projects that the Corps proposes to be approved in an expedited way, or "fast-tracked." Of these five identified projects, there is significant information that will likely rise to the feasibility study level, so all of the required information will be still be available.

3. Starting concrete work sooner, rather than later.

The initial plan by the Army Corps and the Administration was to plan for work to actually begin in 2008. I thought this was unacceptable, and, at my insistence, the schedule for actual substantive work to begin has been pushed up to 2006. We have to act now. Louisiana loses from 25 to 35 square miles a year, so time is not on our side. The work in first 2 years will save critical areas that need action now, and it will also save us valuable time for future work within the 10 year near-term plan and beyond.

4. Including significant diversion projects.

To address Louisiana's coastal crisis, we cannot continue focusing only on the smaller projects. These smaller projects over the years have been very helpful, but I felt strongly that it was time to step up the pace and include significant diversion projects. This near-term plan has done that with the inclusion of diversion projects such as the Diversion at Hope Canal and the Myrtle Grove Diversion in the "fast-tracked" projects.

5. Making sure everyone understands this is a start and not the end.

I believe that everyone involved does indeed understand that – including the President, the Office of Management and Budget, the Corps of Engineers, the State of Louisiana, and me and my colleagues from Louisiana here today.

The important start of the Corps' near-term proposal will be a failure – simply wasted money – unless it leads to further effective projects, some of which were outlined in general in the submission model for the Louisiana Coastal Area Study, some that we will develop within some of the science and technology work included in the proposal. With the near-term plan in place, we can set the ground work to continue the efforts and save and protect Louisiana's coast in the long-term.

Louisiana is losing land at an astonishing rate, and we must act now to stop it. I urge the Committee to include authorization for this near-term plan as Congress moves forward with the final version of the Water Resources Development Act. Authorization is needed as soon as possible so that work can begin.

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you again for holding this hearing and focusing on this important issue. I look forward to continuing the work with my Louisiana colleagues and the members of the subcommittee as we work quickly to address the crisis in Louisiana.